

Collective memories yet to be constructed

Satoru Uchida

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Professor Clinton Merck

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I have adhered to the Honor Code for this assignment. - Satoru Uchida

Note: The author has experienced ostracism, so this work is susceptible to potential biases.

Today, former Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are actively engaging in discussions and communication on social media platforms, such as Reddit and X ([r/exJW](#)). Jehovah's Witnesses are known for their refusal of blood transfusions and absolute pacifism, but less is known about the ostracism former JWs face after leaving the group. Especially those who were born into Jehovah's Witnesses parents, ostracism means familial division. Many former JWs experience similar traumatic experiences, but their experiences as a collective memory are not studied. There are studies on cultural memories of the diaspora (Bhandari, 2021), but the spiritual diaspora lacks a clear focus. For this review, I would like to consider ostracised former JWs' yet-to-be-collected memories. Before diving into the topic, I will provide a brief overview of Jehovah's Witnesses and their practice of ostracism. Then, I will review several ideas on collective memories from various scholars. As we, readers and the author, reach an agreement on the definition of collective memory and its construction process, I will proceed to the autobiographical work by Raymond Frantz, who played a central role in the JW before his apostasy. Using his autobiography, "*Crisis of Conscience*," I will draw an outline of the collective memory of former JWs. I will conclude my argument by discussing its limitations and outlining potential research directions for the future.

Halbwachs, a sociologist who established a sociological framework to understand memory as a social phenomenon, emphasized that individual remembering is inherently social. The process of remembering occurs in society, and it requires others' memories that resemble one's own. Individual memory is the "intersection of collective influences," and the closer memories are to individuals, the more "engraved" they are in the groups that are closer to each

individual (Halbwachs 1992). From a sociological perspective, there are two distinct attitudes towards memory. A collectivistic approach views memory as a societal dynamic that cannot be reduced to individual processes. An individualistic approach, on the other hand, puts the center of memory individual. Only individuals remember, but there are “aggregated individual memories of members of a group,” and the group to which an individual belonged at a certain time fosters individual memories, and this is a “collected” memory (Olick 1999). Modern psychological studies provide a similar definition of memory as “individual memories shared by members of a community that bear on the collective identity of that community” (Hirst et al, 2018). Yet there is a gap between the individual memory shared in society and individual experiences. The process by which each individual's experiences become shared memory is called “mnemonic convergence.” It is a social phenomenon that results from information sharing and social structure (Coman et al, 2016). The process of “mnemonic convergence” turns “collected” memory into “collective,” however, there is a limited number of studies focusing on the formation of collective memory fueled by spiritual exclusion. For this essay, I use the term 'collective memory' as defined by Olick and Coman.

Jehovah's Witnesses were originally founded in 1872 in Pittsburgh, PA, as the International Bible Students Association. According to their official website, there are over 9 million members in 240 countries and territories. Their beliefs and practices include the impending end of the world, rejection of the Christian Trinity, door-to-door evangelism, and refusal of blood transfusions. They also reject many of the traditional Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter (Melton, 2025). For the scope of this work, removal of sinners from the congregation to maintain moral cleanliness, in other words, ostracism from the community, also counts as their characteristic practice. Citing an article from their website, removal is both an

effective measure for maintaining moral standards within their community and an expression of love from community members, as Jehovah did (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2020).

They claim that the shunning has a biblical origin as Paul ordered “stop keeping company, … not even eating with such a man” (1 Cor 5:10-13, New World Translation). Once someone has removed or declared their disassociation from the community, an announcement is made in the weekly community meeting, usually right before the closing prayer, stating, “[person’s name] is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” After the announcement, members of JW generally cease all social interaction with the individual, including phone calls, text messages, or social media. Greetings are not allowed for apostates, but allowed for other individuals who were removed due to other sins. However, it is recommended that you refrain from engaging in conversation or socializing. They specifically mentioned what if one's children were removed or disassociated from JW. If they do not live in the same household, family members must avoid normal contact. Otherwise, greetings and necessary communication are permitted, but should be kept to a minimum. This almost complete ostracism is depicted as a form of love, as “no discipline seems for the present to be joyous, but it is painful; yet afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11, NWT; Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2025).

Former JWs’ experiences are individual and rooted in the closest groups that suddenly became the furthest as a result of shunning. Research published in 2023 revealed the personal experiences after leaving the JW and the long-term impact on life (Luther, 2023). The paper highlights interview responses that express a sense of fear and loss. In the long term, Luther suggested that former JWs are at risk of mental health issues, careers, and well-being. Yet all kinds of experiences are individual, so they cannot be called collective memory yet. To observe

how those experiences transform into collective memories, both the common narrative and the detailed, yet shared, experiences' narrative are important. *Crisis of Conscience* by Raymond Frantz captures both autobiographical and emotional expressions, as well as the changes that occurred in life as a consequence. The characteristics of this collective memory based on the *Crisis of Conscience* can be categorized into three main areas.

The first one is social and familial breakup, which happens immediately after "removal" or "dissociation." The individual memory from this stage is intrinsically linked to the experience of organized and often devastating isolation. Franz expressed emotional cost and isolation. The core individual experiences center on the struggle to hold true to personal conscience in the face of pressure from religious authority. It carries the immense risk of losing lifelong friends and seeing family relationships traumatically affected. Franz, as well as anonymous clients' words in Luther, recall being suddenly cut off from parents, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, even grandparents or grandchildren, and losing long-time, often life-time for those who were born into JW, friendships. This isolation is experienced as an institutionalized process in which the removed individual is mnemonically erased from the daily life of the community, leading to a shocking realization of inconsistency in love. Former JWs often experience the realization that the "deep love" they thought existed within the community or family proved superficial, capable of turning "cold to me" almost overnight. The memory is collected as the feeling that affection was turned off without trouble, and relationships already built were forced to be forgotten, as a product of organizational and authoritative indoctrination rather than a natural feeling. Franz noted that the experience of being judged and betrayed caused the destruction of the image of Jehovah's Witness and their followers as God's instrument and his people.

Such an experience becomes a collected memory as it varies for each situation, and they tend to be isolated. The removal works as both a process of communal mnemonic erasure and the destruction of the social framework. Halbwachs argued that individuals remember only by placing themselves within the perspective of the community and thus memory depends on one's community. Sudden rejection from the community destroys former identity and shared memories of removed individuals.

The deconstruction of personal history and life choices happens. This is the initial attempt at "mnemonic convergence." This stage is defined by the realization that their entire life was built upon a fragile, curated narrative based solely on Jehovah's Witness teachings, forcing a deep reevaluation of past decisions and personal values. A defining characteristic at this stage is the realization that a large measure of what their life as a JW was based on a "myth" which is persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Franz and other former JWs on Luther (2023) recalled building their "whole life plans," including decisions regarding the amount of education, career plans, marriage, and whether to have children. All the goals sought were guided by Jehovah's Witnesses through publications and meetings. Franz noted the personal, unsettling effect of organizational statements that essentially called upon young people to "set aside interest in marriage for an indefinite time" due to the shortness of time until Armageddon. In addition, former JWs who decided to learn the Bible in a different place shared they had a strong sense that they no longer agreed with JW teachings as they lack solid Scriptural support, leading them to feel like a hypocrite. The profound disappointment that arises when apocalyptic predictions tied to specific dates do not materialize, or when their interpretation changes under the "new light," exacerbates the situation. This whole process caused emotional distress, mental confusion,

and guilt. They remember the organization told them that they reached false conclusions on their own, which they felt was "not being fair or honest."

The second stage is a process of deconstruction of personal memories belonging to a community no longer available. The process is connected to mnemonic convergence. Former JWs realize their life plans and values were guided by teachings, and often greatly differ from what most people have. It allows former JWs to put their former beliefs into the JW community, not collected memories based on personal experiences. Schematic narrative template shift from JW's template to a new, former-JW's template, which tends to victimize themselves (Wertsch, 2008).

Franz, who continued studying the Bible after leaving JW, then experienced spiritual and intellectual liberation. A key feature of the former JWs' memory at this stage is the profound spiritual relief that comes from removing the cognitive filter provided by the organization, despite the process taking a long time. He noted an increased appreciation for the Bible and felt a sense of relief from "spiritual tyranny." The subsequent freedom, resulting from no longer being subject to mental domination or spiritual tyranny, relieves the mind. It also means that personal faith is no longer mediated by someone else, but by one's own. His memory says the real question turned out to be not organizational affiliation or specific doctrinal teachings, but rather "what are we as persons?" After the painful period of adjustment, a distinct feeling of relief and peace emerges. This process transforms the previous psychological dependence, where the individual felt unable to have a sense of identity without membership in the JW, into a confident belief that their happiness and hopes are dependent, not on a certain person or organization, but on God or themselves.

The third stage took place in a community, but in a broader sense. It relies on collective memory regarding the Bible and its understandings, in addition to the adoption of personal narratives from the new community of society. The newly adopted personal narratives often incorporate JWs as a source of counter-narratives, which is a specific version of the past that opposes the collected memories of the dominant group (Kansteiner, 2002). It usually comes with the delegitimization of JW, reframing them as a mental domination group. As former members are stripped of their social framework of the family and congregation, they turn to digital platforms to engage in social sharing. It is within these online networks that the mnemonic convergence happens, transforming disparate, individual accounts into a unified counter-memory. Just as Crisis of Conscience by Raymond Frantz serves as a charter document validating the reality of the apostate experience, these digital communities function as the new mnemonic community. Consequently, the memory of the former Jehovah's Witness transitions from a collected aggregate of private pain into a genuine collective memory, reframing the organization as a mental domination group.

In conclusion, the journey of the former Jehovah's Witness is a movement from one collective memory to another, passing through a painful stage of isolation. The process of forming collective memory, based on experiences from the closest group, happened on social media, one of the furthest groups. As discussed earlier, the individual is first "mnemonically erased" from their family and congregation, destroying their social framework. However, they do not stay in the stage of "collected memory" forever. Through the "mnemonic convergence" found on platforms like Reddit, they realize their life was based on a "myth" and find a new image of oneself. This digital community allows them to rebuild the identity that was lost. It turns the

"spiritual diaspora" into a unified group that can finally tell its own counter-narrative against the organization.

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